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Root, Elihu

Seventy-fifth anniversary of the Century Association

New York

1922

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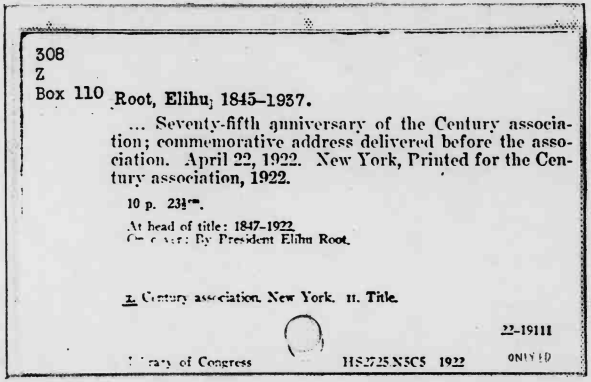

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SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

The Century Association

Commemorative Address

By

President Elihu Root

April 22, 1922

1847—1922

SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

OF

THE CENTURY ASSOCIATION

Commemorative Address

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE ASSOCIATION

April 22, 1922

NEW YORK

PRINTED FOR THE CENTURY ASSOCIATION

1922

THE ANNIVERSARY MEETING

The Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Century Club was celebrated on Saturday, April 22, 1922, by a gathering of fully 500 members at the Club House. The President of the Century delivered a commemorative address and a series of moving pictures of members past and present was exhibited, including characteristic and lifelike presentations of the late Joseph H. Choate, Charles Collins, J. Alden Weir, William C. Church, Theodore Weston, Edward L. Henry, Francis Lynde Stetson, George H. Smillie, Robert H. Robertson, John A. Church and Frederick Sturges; also the famous moving picture of the meeting of F. Hopkinson Smith, Dr. Daniel Elliot, Dr. Daniel M. Stimson, and Dean Van Amringe with other members still living, in the club rooms of pre-Volstead days. Various groups of members at the dinner table and in the club rooms, photographed by Dr. Wm. P. Northrup, were thrown upon the screen; after which the members devoted themselves to conversation, reminiscence, and song. President Root's address is printed herewith.

ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT ELIHU ROOT

It is seventy-five years since Gulian Verplanck, William Cullen Bryant, Henry W. Bellows, Daniel Huntington, Jonathan Sturges, Asher B. Durand, and a little group of their sympathetic friends, forty-two in all, joined in founding "The Century" for the purpose of promoting the advancement of art and literature.

They called their organization simply "The Century." Ten years later the Legislature granted them a corporate charter under the name "The Century Association." As the years passed, the demands of intimate fellowship developed the accessories and methods of a club, and the associations of friendship were preserved by the familiar scenes of a club home. For corporate purposes and by legal definition we are "The Century Association." We can probably be described best to the world at large as "The Century Club." But here, among its members, the institution is as it was in the beginning, simply "The Century"; and the meaning of the name is to be learned not from the dictionary, but only from the traditions and memories and living purpose evoked in the life of the institution by the never-ceasing stream of influence from a spiritual impulse sent forth by the great-hearted founders.

I do not think it was ever anybody's intention that the Century should perform its function of promoting the advancement of art and literature by becoming an institution for the education of others outside of its member-

ship. It was an association to learn rather than to teach, to help each other in acquiring knowledge, appreciation, discriminating judgment, and true feeling in art and literature, through the inter-action one upon the other of sympathetic and friendly natures. So the purpose of The Century has prevented it from becoming didactic or reforming towards the rest of the world, and has enabled the "authors, artists, and amateurs of letters and the fine arts," composing its constitutional membership, to live together in the unruffled harmony of modest friendship.

We are living in a different world from that in which The Century was founded. That was a quiet and leisurely world. The good Queen Victoria was in the early years of her long and serene reign. Gladstone and Disraeli were young members who had not yet found themselves, in the House of Commons. No one had yet heard of the British Empire. Louis Philippe sat on the throne of France. Germany was a multitude of petty independent states, apparently absorbed in the ponderous and trivial etiquette of opera bouffe courts. Bismarck was in that year at the age of thirty-two, making his first appearance in the Prussian Landtag.

Italy was a geographical expression for the region in which Austrian possessions and states of the Church and decadent principalities faintly continued ancient intrigue. The star of Cavour had not risen. Garibaldi was an unnoted exile in South America. In Austria Francis Joseph had not yet begun the long reign which was to end in such tragic disaster. In Russia a nation of serfs was chained to the soil under the iron hand of Nicholas I. The Turk ruled the Balkans. The first few treaty ports of China had just been opened for trade with the foreign devils. Japan was mermetically sealed and the Shoguns ruled within. Throughout the continent of Europe the fires of the coming revolution slumbered unnoted. Throughout South America the process of internal fermentation, which seems as necessary to the

making of republics as it is to the making of beer, was pursuing its conventional and externally negligible course.

In the United States there was quiet, hardly disturbed by the sideshow of the Mexican War. Webster and Ashburton had just settled the northeastern boundary. The Oregon Treaty had just been signed. California and the vast mountain regions to the east of it were Mexican territory. Individual enterprise was winning the west in family formation. Polk was leading the procession of mediocrity in Executive office. Procrastination was feebly endeavoring to avert the inevitable conflict over slavery by a succession of futile compromises. Whittier and Lowell were voices crying in the wilderness. The period of Irving and Cooper and Bryant was passing. The period of Emerson and Hawthorne and Longfellow and Holmes and Parkman was just beginning. In that very year the Brook Farm phalanx was dissolved.

Morse and Eliot and Huntington were tending the cradle of art in America. The Bessemer steel process had not yet been invented. There were but few short local railroads, not amounting to one-fiftieth part of our present railroad system, scattered throughout the country. Steam navigation was still in its feeble and experimental stage. It was less than three years since Morse had demonstrated the success of the first telegraph line in messages between Baltimore and Washington. Men were still practically in the age of the stage coach and the sailing vessel. Great corporations as we see them were unknown. Great labor organizations as we see them were unknown.

No one had realized the tremendous power of organization for peaceful enterprise. No one had realized the tremendous power of mechanical transportation and swift communication which are breaking down the physical barriers between peoples and making all the nations of the earth interdependent, and changing the community of nations from a convenient working theory of international

relation to a necessity vital to national independence because vital to national life. There were no radio stations, no telephones, no telegraphs, no aeroplanes, no automobiles, no elevators, no skyscrapers, no stenographers, no typewriters. Life was lived at long hand. Farming was an occupation but not yet a business. The vast multiplication of human power to produce wealth was still in the future. The comparative poverty of mankind favored simplicity. The physical obstacles to speed of action assured opportunity and time for reflection and mature judgment. The tardy steps of news discouraged the spectacular and sensational.

The highly accelerated speed of life in these later days cannot fail to affect character. The multiplication of objectives in life, the multitude of material prizes for enterprise, the imperative need for alert perception, swift decision and sudden action, cannot fail to create new habits of thought and feeling.

How comes it that, after all, "The Century" is the same and the spirit of the founders of three-quarters of a century ago still remains among the associates who know them only by tradition? Good fellowship and friendship, a sane and gentle philosophy of life, sympathy in love of beauty in art and literature and character, have not been frightened away by the rude alarums and excursions of a turbulent world. I think it is because those benign spirits were seeking something of more worth than all the wealth and power of this wonderful age of material progress. They formed an association not for the purpose of doing something, but for the purpose of being something.

Many members of The Century have done fine things. Paintings and sculptures and noble buildings and books that will live and unselfish service to the community have come from them. But the test in The Century is not what it has done, but what it has become. Thousands of associations for profit and power and glory of their members, to instruct and educate others, to prevent civil society from pursuing

conduct which they disapprove and insist upon its following conduct which they approve, to reform and regenerate the world, fill the air with a great noise. The Century has no such mission. Its objective is in the influence of its members on each other to care for sincerity in art and literature and in character, to achieve the liberal spirit, the habit of kindly judgment, to be unimpressed by the external displays of life, to care for our fellows because of what they are, not because of what they may achieve.

These things which make for the building of character and the growth of the spirit are what the founders of The Century sought, and from their day influence upon character has formed character, extending the influence to new generations, standards of judgment accepted have become habits of thought and feeling, memories have ripened into traditions and as the generations have passed, through the miracle of spiritual succession the founders live and will continue to live though their names be forgotten. In that spirit The Century has kept itself simple. In an age of marble palaces and eastern magnificence it has kept itself inexpensive so that wealth should not by any means become a requisite for membership.

There is a motto: I don't know whence it came. I saw it years ago over a doorway in the office of an old-fashioned banking house in Holland. It runs like this: "L'âge d'or 'est l'âge où l'or ne regnait pas." The Century has lived in the spirit of that motto. Joseph de Maistre said: "One's country is an association upon the same soil, of the living and the dead, with all who are yet to be born." Such an alliance in The Century in a peculiarly personal sense between ourselves, the living, and all the Centurians of the past, and all who are yet to come, we celebrate upon this anniversary. As our memories drift back over the periods of our own membership in this Association, how full of feeling they must become.

We may be dimly conscious that back in the past were the

founders whom we have never seen, but after Verplanck and Bryant and Bancroft we begin to remember faces and forms and we begin to fill the familiar spaces of the club with the memories of Huntington and Bigelow and Potter and Choate and Evarts and Carter and Beaman and Henry E. Howland and Loyall Farragut and Gilder and Richard Hunt and Lawrence Hutton and John LaFarge and McKim and Stanford White and St. Gaudens and Frank Millet and Tom North and Stoddard and Weir and Weston. Each one of us can go on with the list according to his own special affections. What fine and noble fellows they were! How interesting and admirable! What wit, what humor, what spirit, what genius for friendship! What dear and lovable fellows they were. A blessed thing, is it not, to have the memory of them as a part of our lives! All the mines of Nevada could not buy such a thing. We are better and more human because of them. We are grateful in recognition. We are affectionate in memory. We have a feeling for the places where we knew them, and we cry "Long live The Century!"

April 22, 1922.

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